

New wave of evictions threatens Gypsies

Families forced off land and into illegal plots as minister plans to give police greater powers

by Tracy McVeigh Social Affairs Editor and Oliver Morrison

Human rights campaigners have condemned a wave of evictions and court actions against Gypsies and Irish Travellers which they say are threatening to extinguish a whole way of life.

Dozens of families face the prospect of being pushed off plots of land they own and forced to move back into illegal "side-of-the-road" and wasteland camping. Children will be unable to go to school and the

elderly and infirm unable to access health services, say the campaigners.

Eric Pickles, the communities and local government minister, is drafting new laws to allow police more powers to evict and arrest people for trespass on public land. Planning laws are also being changed to stop applications for retrospective permission to put caravans on private land.

Pickles has already announced the reversal of previous efforts to provide "pitches" within all local authorities, abolishing the regional planning bodies which were to oversee provision of



Two of the 50 children who are facing eviction, with their families, from Dale Farm, near Basildon in Essex. Photograph by Susan Craig-Greene

registered sites for travellers and ease the tensions caused by Gypsies being forced to camp illegally.

The grants that had been made available to councils to provide sites have also been slashed, although an estimated £18m a year is being spent on evictions.

"Gypsies are being squeezed on all sides in this wave of intolerance and racism which is unlike anything I've ever seen before," said Gratton Puxon, 69, a founder member of the Gypsy Council.

There are around 18,000 Gypsy and Traveller caravans in England, with 80% of them on authorised sites, land they own or rent. The numbers on illegal sites is so small, according to the government's own reports, that they could all be accommodated on one square mile.

The clampdown comes against a background of rising attacks against Roma people in Europe which has led to a demand for the EU to tackle what some are calling an attempted "ethnic cleansing" of travelling people. France has intensified its crackdown on Gypsies, announcing that 300 sites would be closed down in the next three months and any Gypsies found breaking the law would be deported. In 2008 the Italian government declared its Roma population was a national security risk, while in 2009 more than 100 Romanian Gypsies were attacked with bricks and bottles in Ireland and driven from their homes.

In Essex, where the statutory requirement for the provision of sites to accommodate 104 travelling people has now gone with the abolition of the regional planning assemblies, Basildon council issued an eviction notice last week on eight families living on their own land at one site. It is also embroiled in a court battle to evict a further 70 families from a site at Dale Farm, on the outskirts of the town. At the former scrapyard, bought by Irish Travellers 10 years ago and slowly transformed into a caravan park, families have been buying tents in preparation for their eviction. The camp's 50 or so children have no idea whether they will return to their primary school after the summer holidays.

"There is a very real sense of fear and people are very worried, especially the



Mary Ann McCarthy, an Irish Traveller: 'We've never been treated as badly as we are now.'

old people. There's people here ill and infirm who can't be going back on the road and there's nowhere to go," said Margaret McCarthy, 45, a mother of two who, like many others on the site, has vowed to fight the eviction, planning blockades and protests.

"They're trying to destroy our pride and our dignity. The British government is trying to do away with Gypsies. It's scandalous, but nobody is watching, so nobody will help."

"It's seen as the last bastion of racism. It's not socially acceptable to express racism against ethnic minorities, but against Gypsies and travellers it's fine," said Emma Nuttall of the support group Friends, Families and Travellers.

"We are getting more and more calls from families who are in a panic about where they can and can't go, desperately trying to find bits of land they can buy and get planning permission for before the laws change, just so their kids can go to school."

Hostility from local communities is high. The Equality and Human Rights Commission Scotland is so concerned at the way many local newspapers are presenting issues with Gypsies, and the racist remarks left on their noticeboards, that it is contacting media outlets "to remind them that moderation of online comment boards is crucial in order to prevent the incitement of racial hatred".

At Dale Farm, Mary Ann McCarthy, 69, insists on an inspection of her immaculate static caravan and says the stereotype of "dirty gypsies" is not true.

"Travellers are very house proud; you always get a few people who leave a mess but so does any community." Born in a horse-drawn caravan, she is wistful of the days when her family would be welcomed by farmers who relied on Travellers to pick seasonal fruit and at the fairs where their horses were prized.

"We have never been treated really well, but it's never been as bad as now."

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